

# **Columbia Downtown Focus Group**

**Minutes from Meeting September 26, 2006**

**Issued: November 17, 2006**

These minutes provide a summary of the meeting discussion. Some comments are reorganized by topic, rather than the order in which comments were made.

## **Review of Focus Group Meeting Minutes from August 30, 2006**

### **Opening**

Thanks were given to Cynthia Coyle for arranging for the group to meet at Kahler Hall. At the previous Focus Group meeting on August 30, some members of the public expressed unhappiness at their inability to speak during Focus Group discussions, so Linda Burton asked the group if it wanted to allow public questions during allotted Focus Group discussion times. The Focus Group rejected the proposed change and Linda Burton said the Focus Group will have 20 minutes for discussion after each presentation, and the public will be able to speak for five minutes after the Focus Group discussed each subject. The audience would be able to make comments after each agenda item rather than holding all comments until the end of the meeting.

### **Fiscal Analysis Presentation**

Marsha McLaughlin introduced Jeff Bronow, chief of DPZ's research division. She explained the role of fiscal analysis in the General Plan 2000 and of the function that the analysis plays in estimating the taxes and other revenues generated by developments, which would be used to cover any additional burden placed on the county's public services. Marsha McLaughlin pointed out that a host of potential physical improvements could be funded by the increase in tax revenues from developments in Columbia Downtown.

Jeff Bronow's Fiscal Analysis looked at both the operating and capital costs in the public sector, and he used the current level of service as the basis for his projections to estimate future expenses and revenues. He described three possible scenarios for the 30-year build out plan for Columbia Downtown and their effects on potential revenues. The *Fiscal Impact Study Results* and its companion background document are available at: <http://www.co.ho.md.us/DPZ/Community/ColumbiaMasterPlanCharrette.htm>.

### **Focus Group Response**

Much of the Focus Group's initial reaction to the Fiscal Analysis presentation concerned assumptions used by Jeff Bronow in his presentation, largely because it was felt that using existing conditions as a base for future projections may not be desired given the vision for Columbia Downtown. One member suggested that assuming the value of downtown housing would be 7% higher than Countywide housing is problematic because it did not take into account that many units would be designated as affordable. Another member suggested that because of the presence of affordable units, Town Center developments would have more children than the Fiscal Analysis estimated. Both will have an impact on operating and capital costs, thereby altering revenue projections. A member wondered if the rezoning of commercial lands into residential lands would affect the fiscal impact. Marsha McLaughlin told the group that the same model could be rerun using different assumptions.

A Focus Group member expressed concern about the timing of the development, wondering why commercial development was spread over five years instead of all at once. Jeff Bronow replied that commercial development tends to follow residential construction, which was the assumption used.

## **Audience Response**

An audience member pointed out that the assumptions on capital costs only included two roads, to which Jeff Bronow replied that his assumption was that the developer would pay for most of the road changes. The lack of transit costs and parking facilities were also pointed out by the audience, to which Jeff Bronow said that costs associated with these types of projects are typically covered by funding sources other than general revenues, which is the focus of the fiscal study. Other members of the audience asked questions about the demographics of the residents who would be moving to new downtown housing. A member of the audience asked Jeff Bronow to explain how he arrived at his assumptions for police expenditures. He answered that existing ratios were used to create the number of calls per person based on the percentage of all calls to residential dwellings; office and commercial were calculated separately. Another member wondered about inflation, to which Jeff Bronow responded that both the costs and revenues projections were static. Marsha McLaughlin pointed out that the goal of the fiscal analysis is not to base a development program on the potential to maximize revenues for the County, but to check for red flags and ensure that the downtown development pay for itself and also contribute some revenues.

## **Wincopin Street Alternatives**

Mina Hilsenrath, chief of DPZ's Division of Environmental and Community Planning, gave a PowerPoint presentation that illustrated possible scenarios for the proposed Wincopin Street extension. She started with an explanation of the importance of connections in New Urbanists' guidelines and why it called for extending Wincopin Street through the grove of trees by the American City Building. She offered three portrayals of Wincopin Street: the No Build Scenario, the Charrette Vision, and a Modified Compromise.

## **Focus Group Response**

The general response from the Focus Group was in favor of keeping the grove as it currently exists, although several members said that all options should be in the master plan, including the possibility of looking at connections in new ways if existing buildings were demolished. A Focus Group member thanked Mina Hilsenrath, indicating that DPZ had listened to the group and was willing to be flexible. This member also urged that GGP should hire a qualified, professional design team to evaluate and design the space in question, after which the FG could evaluate that proposal. Other members expressed concern that building a road through the park area would only cut off the Lakefront from the surrounding area. Mina Hilsenrath pointed out that a road could be designed primarily for pedestrians and used sparingly by service and emergency vehicles. More important was having a clearly delineated "connection," whether a road or a broad pedestrian sidewalk, to join the areas north and south of the Lakefront for increased mobility. A Focus Group member was concerned with preserving the serene natural and historic character of the area and to protect the human scale, which was seconded by several others. Several Focus Group members acknowledged the need for a connection that was more pedestrian-friendly, while others talked about the street as relief for times when Little Patuxent Parkway is heavily used. During this discussion, the topic of downtown management was brought up as a way to continue the dialogue on how the space would be used and what controls would be needed.

## **Audience Response**

An audience member challenged the depiction of the topography near the American City Building as portrayed in the DPZ modeling of the area. He expressed concern that a road would create noise at the top of the amphitheater, and stated that in his view the area is already lively and a popular gathering space with no need for improvement. Other audience members brought up the connection between the Mall and Lakefront. Members of the audience expressed their desire that the Lakefront should not be a commercial area, but instead the cultural and social heart of Columbia, hence there was no need for extending Wincopin Street. Another audience member suggested various public facilities improvements, such as public restrooms and an underground tunnel from the Mall to the Lakefront.

## **DPZ's Draft Focus Group Summation**

William Mackey of DPZ delivered a presentation that summarized the DPZ's synthesis of Focus Group feedback from the meetings and members' emails. The draft summary is available on the web at: <http://www.co.ho.md.us/DPZ/Community/ColumbiaMasterPlanCharrette.htm>.

## **Focus Group Response**

The Focus Group response to the document varied. One member felt that feedback did not need to go any further but that discussions should continue. Others were satisfied in how the summation showed that DPZ had listened to the Focus Group and was recording their comments. Focus Group members differed on whether public comments should be included in the summation and whether the document lacked content on key topics or adequately documented the depth of discussions. The Focus Group agreed not to reach a consensus and asked that the summation reflect that the Focus Group is neither approving nor disapproving the master plan for Columbia Downtown. A member specifically stated that there should be no Focus Group report because there was no consensus, and DPZ's summation of Focus Group comments should be the only final written product from the group. Another member asked that the DPZ clearly label the document as DPZ's summation on the website to make the public aware of the source and point of view of the document.

Members of the Focus Group also discussed the proposed Design Advisory Panel. Some members felt that there had not been rigorous design controls in Columbia in the past years, and there needed to be architectural oversight for the new development. Other members felt that certain themes needed a greater coverage in the Summation. Topics cited were coordinated development by developers, access to downtown, east-west connections, further study of existing chokepoints, updated design guidelines and green technology were cited.

## **Audience Response**

A member of the audience expressed interest in having good communication and thought it was valuable to know what DPZ thinks it heard. The speaker also emphasized that the Focus Group did not give its stamp of approval for the master plan and that any DPZ document should reflect this. Another member thought the document captured the themes of the Focus Group and to "let the plan speak for itself." Additional topics were brought up by the audience, ranging from the appropriateness of higher density urban developments in Columbia Downtown to a variety of possible public amenities.

## **Attendees:**

### **Focus Group**

Bobo, Liz  
Brown, Maggie  
Coyle, Cynthia  
Godine, Doug  
Gray, Karen  
Hollis, Rob  
Kirsh, Phil  
Laidig, Patricia  
Mugane, Bridget  
Orenstein, Hal  
    (Hal Orenstein, rep)  
Parrish, Jane  
Pivar, Mary  
Richardson, Lee  
Saleem, Mohammed  
Sosinski, Tim  
Talkin, Richard  
Tennenbaum, Bob  
    (Sam Crozier, rep)  
Tousey, Hugh

### **Facilitator**

Burton, Linda

### **Public**

Broida, Gail  
Broida, Joel  
Brown, Todd  
Chambers, Joann  
Coren, Evan  
Feldmark, Jessica  
Harris, Ben  
Hekimian, Alex  
Howell, Sherman

Johnson, Rebecca  
Kasemeyer, Ed (State Senator)  
Knowles, Lloyd  
Konde, Ursula  
Lapine, Chuck  
Lawson, Marvin  
McLaughlin, Jo  
Meskin, Stephen  
Rowe, Bill  
Russell, Barbara  
Scott, Ginger  
Scott, Thomas  
Seiler, Tom  
Siddiqui, Rafia  
Sitzman, Kevin  
Smith, J.D.  
Swatek, Russ  
Terrasa, Jen  
Toback, Rhoda  
Wengel, Linda  
Yesley, Joel

### **Press**

Blakely, Andrei (Patuxent Publishing)  
Greenback, Laura (Baltimore Examiner)  
Merrell, Gerald (Baltimore Sun)

### **DPZ**

McLaughlin, Marsha  
Lafferty, Stephen  
Hilsenrath, Mina  
Mackey, Bill  
Blaumanis, Dace  
Clay, Randy  
Sprenkle, Tom